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ABSTRACT

This report discusses "Readings in Educational Research," a project that resulted from a discussion of the 1986 professional development staff of the Washington Education Association, who showed an interest in bringing teachers closer to the research process and their own professional development. The difficulties of using educational research as a resource for teachers are reported. The format and process of the project are similar to the "Great Books" process where teachers read previously prepared research materials that are topic centered. The pilot process involved recruiting a small number of classroom teachers to serve as facilitators of research study groups. Evaluation of the pilot study included the use of a pre-post questionnaire designed to focus on participant attitudes toward reading research and collegial learning. (SI)

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CLASSROOM TEACHERS AND ORIGINAL RESEARCH: NATURAL PARTNERS

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"Set up this way, I am more inclined to read research."

"Teachers need this type of forum to talk, share ideas and philosophies."

-- Teacher comments during evaluation of the pilot test.

Much has been written about our inability, within the education profession, to place original research into the hands of the classroom practitioner. In those instances where such research has successfully been made available to educators, relevance and intelligibility have not automatically been assured. Many stumbling blocks impede the natural partnership which should develop between educational research and the practitioner for whom it is intended.

Difficulties of Reading Research

Many teachers wonder why they should read original research since both popular and academic journals often include summaries of the research in an easy to digest fashion. While popular publications are valuable sources of information for teachers, they tend to provide a generalized and often simplistic explanation of research study results

Other reasons that research findings do not reach the classroom teacher include some of the following familiar refrains:

- o Research formats, language and methods are unfamiliar and intimidating to the novice;
- o Problems of accessibility of research studies, especially in rural settings, are still real despite computer technology;
- o Teachers' time is limited and they perceive the reading of research to be a very time consuming activity;

- o Teachers are generally anxious to put new information into practice, a fact that may be frustrating to them if research results appear to be conflictive or to have no immediate applicability;
- o Suspicion of the researcher's "ivory tower" perspective may prevent teachers from trusting the results of educational research studies;
- o Research is often claimed to be the justification for the "top-down" imposition of pedagogical practices.

These and other equally legitimate realities block teachers from taking advantage of educational research as a resource. Clearly, bridges are needed -- bridges that facilitate teacher access to research, encourage the analysis and evaluation of ideas, and encourage collegial relationships among teachers.

Genesis of Project

This project arose out of a discussion in 1986 between Professional Development Staff of the Washington Education Association, represented by Dolores Heisinger, and David Berliner and Ursula Casanova, both currently at Arizona State University. We were all concerned about bringing teachers closer to the research and felt a deep commitment to teacher empowerment by placing teachers in charge of their own professional development. We were also concerned about the fleeting nature of professional development activities for teachers, and about the "top-down" characteristic of most of those opportunities. That is, teachers themselves have little to say about what they want to learn and how they want to learn it. All of us felt that the process of staff development, as currently constituted, tends to reduce teachers' professionalism. Professionals, we all know, make their own decisions about these matters.

Two fundamental beliefs guided the development of this project. First, that knowledge of the latest research results on teaching and learning has the

potential for enhancing teachers' effectiveness in the classroom. Second, that teachers have the ability to make informed decisions about their professional development needs.

We, therefore, agreed on two major goals: To increase teacher access to pertinent research findings, and to contribute to the empowerment of teachers. These goals are interdependent since increased knowledge of their professional literature and increased control over that knowledge base is an essential component of professional empowerment.

Underlying Assumptions

We entered this project with several underlying assumptions. First, we believe that classroom teachers have the competence to read and understand primary sources of research in teaching and learning. Second, that teachers should be in charge of most of their professional development. Lastly, that professional development should be a collegial activity. These assumptions guided our choice of format and our choice of process for this project.

Format

The format and process selected for this project are analogous to the format and processes used in the successful "Great Books" program -- a process which has been currently popularized and in which adults get together for group discussions of novels which they read as individuals. As is the case with the "Great Books" program, we chose to use original works, not secondary sources. We made this choice because we believe that most of the syntheses and summaries written for teachers tend to emphasize mainly those conclusions which are compatible with official policies and minimize or ignore those which are not. The BTES study is a good example of this. The study's finding that increased academic learning time (ALT) is a main contributor to increased

achievement was reduced to an emphasis on "time-on-task." This interpretation has led to increases in the length of the school day and year rather than to attention to all the contributors to ALT such as the of compatibility between what is taught and what is tested. The findings from BTES have thus been distorted to fit the preferred interventions of administrators. Rather than addressing the documented lack of compatibility between curriculum and standardized tests, a problem often noted by teachers, the emphasis is placed on interventions that impose more demands on teachers.

In a fashion similar to the "Great Books" process, teachers read previously prepared research materials which are topic centered. That is, each packet is composed of a set of readings around a topic of interest to teachers, e.g., class size. The research packets are designed to be read and discussed in four or five group meetings. Guided study is assisted by a facilitator and a set of questions which probe into the subject matter to encourage analysis and debate among participants. The materials strive to provide different points of view or perspectives on the same issue. The aim is to encourage teachers to discuss what they read, to analyze the ideas, and to evaluate them from their own perspectives.

One of the main benefits of these packets is that by providing a set of materials around a topic, we facilitate teacher access to them. Research articles, both pro and con, have been carefully selected from extensive reviews for their clarity, conciseness and importance. By pre-selecting and packaging the most representative research studies on a given topic, some of the problems of time constraint are alleviated for the user. Teachers are saved the trouble of endless searches for all available articles on a topic -- plus the time consuming process of narrowing down to the best articles. However, the materials are not summarized or synthesized for the reader. Instead, annotations to the text are provided. The annotations may define an

unfamiliar term, or prod the reader to question the text, or suggest a relationship with another more familiar situation. By their very presence, the annotations also elaborate and highlight important passages in the text. In addition, each article and each set of readings is followed by discussion questions. The questions are meant to encourage interpretation, application and evaluation. They may also help teachers to determine the ultimate value of the findings for further study and perhaps for implementation in their schools or classrooms.

Process

So far, we have emphasized the content of these materials and the format we have used to structure that content. However, an equally important component of this project is the process. Small groups of teachers elect to participate in this project. Within each group, one teacher volunteers to serve as facilitator. Together, they form their small study group and then select a topic for discussion. The study group decides when and where to meet and how often. During the pilot study, teachers displayed their creativity and ingenuity for finding meeting times and places for their groups. They met at school, on a rotation basis at each other's homes for snacks, or over wine and cheese at a nearby pub. Some even met during the school day with release time provided by the school district.

Teachers also decide how to structure the meetings and how to divide the sets of readings. The only requirement, from our perspective, is that enough time be allowed to discuss each set of discussion questions in depth. During the pilot study, most meeting times ranged from forty-five minutes to one-and-one-half hours, depending on how involved and lively discussions became. This could mean that each packet would take several weeks of discussion time. Based upon the pilot study, we suggest meetings of about one hour each for a total of three to four weeks. We found that teachers "made" time to get together,

and that being part of a group provided the incentive to "do the reading" on their own.

Teaching Teachers to Read Research or "Kittens 'n Mittens"

The ideas emerging from the original discussions in 1986 were used to create two packets of readings. The project was financed by the Washington Education Association (WEA). In this work, we were fortunate to have the invaluable assistance of Peggy Placier who effectively translated our ideas into the actual materials.

In the fall of 1987, we were ready to test the materials at a workshop conducted for the WEA. The attempt was a disaster. Participants in the workshop refused the materials for two major reasons. First, they had been expecting a different type of workshop. Secondly, they found the materials too unfamiliar and difficult. We changed the workshop to more closely fit the expectations of the participants but we were most interested in their assessment of the materials. As we discussed their objections, we learned that those present welcomed the concept and underlying assumptions discussed above. They said they wanted to use the materials, and then one of the participants clarified the real problem for us. She first supported the effort and then explained that we wanted her to read Shakespeare, but she was not yet ready; she needed "kittens 'n mittens" first. Thus, was born the idea for an introductory packet.

The introductory packet, our "kittens 'n mittens" component, serves several purposes. Number one, it explains the rationale for the readings; number two, it provides teachers with a framework for understanding the unfamiliar structure of research articles; and number three, it provides a set of graded readings for practice.

The first portion of the introductory package explains why it is important for teachers to make the effort to read educational research and describes what "Readings in Educational Research" is designed to accomplish. It then explains some of the characteristics of research articles, for example, typical format, differences between qualitative and quantitative research, and definitions of common jargon. A brief, succinct explanation of statistical terminology is also included.

The graded readings in the packet provide readers with comparisons between research syntheses and primary sources. By gradually increasing the complexity of the text, teachers are guided from the usual "research" information they receive from a popular journal to a research article from a refereed journal. Discussion questions encourage the readers to make comparisons and also to gain an understanding of this unfamiliar genre. This introductory packet is the only required reading in the series. Its need was suggested by teachers, and teachers have also attested to its usefulness.

The Pilot Process

The pilot process, which can also serve as the foundation for a dissemination strategy later on, involved recruiting a small number of classroom teachers to serve as facilitators of research study groups. This group of teachers was not particularly knowledgeable about reading research. Instead, they had a willingness to approach the reading of original research and an interest in learning collaboratively with their colleagues.

The group of facilitators was brought together for a one-day meeting, during which they were given the rationale for the project, were introduced to the research packets, and were able to brainstorm ideas for recruiting members for their study groups. They also discussed potential meeting times, places and settings that would be appropriate to each of their own circumstances.

After only one meeting, all of the teachers were able to go back to their school buildings and convince a few of their friends to participate with them in the pilot study. Facilitators were asked to document the processes they used to recruit colleagues and to record how they made decisions about meeting times and places. They were also asked to tape record the study sessions, if members agreed, so that we might eavesdrop on their discussions. We hoped that we might be able to judge the appropriateness of the study questions in this manner.

Project Evaluation

Evaluation of the pilot study included the use of a pre-post questionnaire designed to focus on participant attitudes toward reading research and toward collegial learning. Another set of questions asked for input about the format of the materials as well as about the appropriateness of the selected research articles. These paper-pencil instruments coupled with the audio tapes yielded an abundance of information. For example, we were able to detect changes in attitudes toward reading research among some members of the study groups by comparing audio tapes of first sessions with those of final study sessions. Additionally, we learned that the format and legibility of the materials was extremely important and either facilitated or greatly frustrated the learning process. These and other evaluation insights will be used for improving the final products.

Next Steps

The next step in the process of development of this project is a pilot being conducted at a secondary school in Arizona. The librarian at that school, which is one of the NEA Mastery in Learning sites, asked for the opportunity to test the materials at her school. We were delighted at the request because up to now, all pilots have been at the elementary school level. It

will be interesting to see if the secondary school teachers are as accepting of the concept as the elementary school teachers have been.

Another group of teachers, having completed the introductory component, are now testing a content component. Their feedback will help us to determine whether the transition from "kittens 'n mittens" to the standard components is smooth and uneventful.

The most ambitious activity right now is the development of additional packets. We are currently discussing a proposal to the NEA for funding the development of ten additional topics. We hope to be able to complete development of at least two more by the end of summer, 1988. That would give interested teachers four packets from which to choose a topic for study. The two packets already available, but in need of final printing, are cooperative learning, and classroom management. The ones to be developed next will cover parent involvement and mastery learning.

Conclusion

Preliminary response indicates that teachers accept the concept that guides this project and the assumptions that underlie it. We are fairly confident that the content of the introductory is on target. Teachers who have used it have found it challenging but understandable. We think it provides an effective bridge to the content packets.

As we gain confidence, and as we expand our audience, it is important to keep two cautions in mind. First, we must guard the integrity of the concept. Second, we must also guard the integrity of the process. If these materials become another vehicle for district imposed staff development, we have lost sight of the concept. If the materials are used as the content for traditionally organized staff development, that is, faculty meetings and inservice activities, then we have lost the process. To lose either is to

demean this program and to fail in our most important goal, the empowerment of teachers.

We believe that "Readings in Research" responds to an important need in the professional development of teachers. If we accept the concept of teacher empowerment, if we believe that teachers are professionals and as such must be in control of their profession's knowledge base, then we need to provide access to that knowledge base. We must avoid being patronizing and arrogant about research if we are going to see it applied to the classroom. And we have to be ready to accept practitioner's criticism when they find researchers' conclusions inappropriate after thorough discussion and analysis. We must stop applying outside expert band-aids to teachers' classroom problems and instead work in concert with teachers to identify their problems and understand their context. The last ten years have seen an increase in researchers' willingness to enter the classroom and seek to understand its complexity. We need to accomplish the other part, we need to invite teachers to join researchers within the ivory tower and help them to understand the researcher's perspective and methods of inquiry. It is only thus that education can become an integrated field where practitioners and researchers work together for the benefit of students.